

BELLA ENGLISH

Two views of history converge in Plymouth

Thanksgiving has always been one of my favorite holidays. Unlike Christmas, with all its commercial buzz, Thanksgiving is a quiet time when even the earth goes into a meditative stage, a time when we gather with family and friends to give thanks, a time when we can gorge without guilt on truly toxic portions of food. Each year at our table, we say what we're most thankful for. Comments have ranged from "Grateful to be alive" (from an ill friend) to "Toys 'R' Us" (from a young son).

Come to think of it, no one has ever mentioned Native Americans, without whom there wouldn't be any Thanksgiving. The handful of Pilgrims who survived the Mayflower voyage in all likelihood would not have survived that first winter without help from the Wampanoag people.

Here's the party line: Christopher Columbus discovered America, the Indians and settlers joyfully broke bread together that first Thanksgiving, and everyone lived happily ever after.

The painful truth is, the beginning of our country was the beginning of the end for Indians throughout America. Where we celebrate freedom and courage, they mourn oppression and genocide.

So it's little wonder that our day of thanks has become their Day of Mourning. The day was founded in 1970 after Frank James, a Wampanoag elder, was asked to speak at the 350th anniversary celebration of the Pilgrim landing. But when anniversary planners asked to see an advance copy of his speech, they weren't pleased with his statement. James had refused to go along with the history book version of Thanksgiving. Instead, he wrote "with a heavy heart" of slavery, theft, and murder.

Organizers offered to rewrite his speech for him; James said no, and on Thanksgiving Day, hundreds of Indians assembled in protest, and have ever since.

Today, Frank James's son, Moonanum James, is co-leader of the United American Indians of New England, which has become increasingly vocal on the Day of Mourning about the white man's sins. One year, they "buried" Plymouth Rock under mounds of sand. Another year, they confronted Pilgrim Progress marchers, forcing them to curtail their route.

Last year, marching without a permit, the Indians were met by Plymouth police near town center. A melee erupted, with police using pepper spray to control the crowd. The Plymouth 25, as they call themselves, were charged with disorderly conduct and unlawful gathering. The town that considers itself the cradle of America found itself in the headlines linked with oppressive tactics.

Recently, a settlement was reached in which the Indians dropped their police brutality accusations in exchange for the town funding Indian education programs

and posting plaques honoring Indians. In addition, the Indians will be allowed to march from now on without a permit. ("We wouldn't get a permit to march on our own land, anyway," said Moonanum James). But Plymouth police aren't particularly pleased that the town settled; they claim that they were the ones assaulted by the activists.

This year, the group is expecting 1,500 supporters – native and non-native – to gather at noon at Cole's Hill, which overlooks Plymouth Rock. Speakers will protest the imprisonment of Indian leader Leonard Peltier, convicted in the 1970s of killing two FBI agents, and other native struggles. Today, Indians say, they are as bad off as ever, exiled onto homely reservations where the unemployment rate is 50 percent, where the life expectancy is shorter than for any other group, and where alcoholism is rampant. In the cities, Indians face discrimination and hate crimes.

"Unfortunately, people look at the Pequots at Foxwoods and think all of us are rolling in money," said Moonanum James. The Indians, who fast before the Day of Mourning, will hold a potluck social after their march.

Those who gather may very well see the Pilgrims Progress, another time-honored Plymouth tradition. At 10 a.m., a group of "Pilgrims" will march to the Burial Hill for a short church service. Sponsored by the Plymouth Historical Alliance, the march adheres strictly to history: 51 citizens represent the 51 Pilgrims who survived that first winter. They will carry muskets and pikes.

To the Indians, these are weapons of genocide. To the recreators, they are historical symbols, nothing more. "You know, they're fake muskets," said Annette Talbot, the alliance president. "And the pike was a symbol of government authority more than anything else. It's a reenactment of what the Pilgrims did. I suppose we could pretend they didn't carry them, but that seems kind of stupid to me."

Moonanum James wonders how "you can carry the Bible in one hand and a musket in the other."

With luck – and civility – both sides will do their thing peacefully. The settlement Plymouth reached with the protesters is a first step in a healing direction. On Thanksgiving Morning/Mourning, as we give thanks for a country that allows the sometimes rowdy freedom of opposing views, we would do well to remember those who paid such a terrible price for that freedom.

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